



SURVIVAL EVASION RESISTANCE ESCAPE

SERE SCHOOL PREPARES SOLDIERS TO 'RETURN WITH HONOR'

Story and photos by Cindy Ramirez

A slight breeze can be heard whistling through the serene forests in Fort Rucker, Ala., creating a fine ripple on the cool lakes within. Amid the quiet, a group of camouflaged Soldiers from various occupational specialties treks carefully as they train to live off the rugged terrain and survive in isolation as part of the installation's Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape School.



At left: Soldiers fill their canteens with lake water in preparation for field craft training at the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape School at Fort Rucker, Ala., in March. The Soldiers were preparing to spend several days in surrounding forest to learn survival skills and employ the articles of the Code of Conduct.

captured; basic survival skills are indispensable should they become isolated in unfamiliar terrain, including the mountains of Afghanistan or the deserts of Iraq, officials said.

“We teach them how to adapt to that situation, to survive that situation and to return with honor,” said Fort Rucker SERE School instructor Steve, a non-commissioned officer. (Full names and ranks are being withheld due to security concerns.) “We give them the skills they need to survive and return with their pride, knowing that they’re American Soldiers, and that they served their nation proudly during that situation.”

INTEGRAL TRAINING

Survival includes learning how to identify sources of food and water, maintain healthy sanitation and hygiene, construct a safe shelter, build fires, properly treat illness or injuries, and improvise clothing, equipment and weapons. SERE also offers marksmanship training with the M9 pistol and the M4A1 assault rifle, including the “stress shoot” used to teach students to shoot effectively with an elevated pulse and breathing rate. Students participate in a simulated downed aircraft scenario in which they have to break contact with the enemy.

Additionally, Soldiers are taught about cross-cultural communications and how to deal with physical and psychological stresses during captivity.

Fort Rucker’s SERE School was formed in 2006, offering its first course in January 2007 as part of the installation’s U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence. It was first open strictly to aviators who were required to take the course. It remains a mandatory course for aviation officers and warrant officers. With a few years experience under its wing, however, the school has expanded and now includes training for Soldiers from all MOSs, with their commander’s recommendation.

In fiscal year 2009, Fort Rucker’s SERE School graduated about 1,400.

Today, Fort Rucker has about 80 slots in each SERE course cycle — two-thirds of them reserved for aviators and the rest for Soldiers from other MOSs. The 21-day program, which begins a new course every two weeks, expects to graduate some 2,200 students in fiscal year 2010.

One recent graduate is Dan, a medic who is now serving as an instructor at the school after graduating in February.

“Every Soldier should go through it, regardless of their MOS, even if their jobs are not in the spotlight,” Dan said.

Trusting fellow Soldiers — none of whom he’d met before — during the toughest times of the field portion of SERE School was both challenging and rewarding, he said.

“Keeping the faith with my fellow brothers in arms ... keeping the faith *with* and *in* each other,” he said when asked what he considered to be the course’s challenges and rewards, adding that he also learned to channel his inner strength when it was most needed.

“You learn to push yourself to a limit that you hadn’t before; to push yourself further when you think you have nothing left to give.”

Dan said he hopes his experience as a medic encourages Soldiers from various MOSs to apply for SERE School so that they will become more well-rounded and, in turn, help create a better mix of specialties among SERE students.

“This course is no longer just for aviators or special forces,” said Lt. Col. Mikael Ash, commander of the 1st Battalion, 145th Aviation Regiment at the Aviation Center of Excellence. “It’s become an integral part of Soldier training for strength, survival and the Code of Conduct.”

CODE OF CONDUCT

Perhaps more than survival, Ash said, SERE focuses on the intricacies of the Code of Conduct.

“We train them on the application of the Code of Conduct. Everything revolves around that,” Ash said. “In SERE, we emphasize that’s what is most important.”

Under the Code of Conduct, Soldiers are taught about the legal aspects of resistance and escape, including the provisions of the 1949 Geneva Convention, methods of resisting interrogation and indoctrination, as well as techniques for planning and executing an escape.

Once a survival course specifically for aviators and special operations forces, SERE training at Fort Rucker has expanded to include Soldiers of all military occupational specialties. The opportunity to train at SERE School is especially important given the current state of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and other operations across the globe that puts an increasing number of Soldiers on the frontlines, installation officials said.

SERE is designed to provide Soldiers with the skills needed to evade being captured by the enemy, and if captured, to resist interrogation or exploitation and plan their escape. A major focus of SERE training is the Code of Conduct — the values and duties that guide Soldiers should they become prisoners of war.

However, SERE is not limited to teaching Soldiers how to survive if they’re

Ash said the goal is not to teach memorization of the code's articles, but to instill in Soldiers "the true knowledge, spirit and intent of the code."

"It all comes down to coming home safely to your family having served proudly, without disgracing yourself or your country, and knowing that you were the best Soldier possible," Dan said.

Others agree, saying delving into the Code of Conduct beyond basic training was the most important aspect of SERE.

"Anyone can read the articles," said a SERE course chief who asked that his identity be withheld. "What this course does, more than anything, is provide a true intent of the Code of Conduct. That is, in my opinion, what makes a better Soldier."

ORIGINS AND EXPANSION

SERE was created by the U.S. Air Force at the end of the Korean War to teach pilots how to resist and survive extreme abuse should they be captured.

The program started in the Army and Navy following the Vietnam War.

The Army's flagship SERE School is at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, N.C.

SERE training is offered at three levels: Level A is taught to all Soldiers during initial entry; Level B is for Soldiers whose jobs, specialties or assignments entail a moderate risk of capture, such as ground combat units and security forces; and Level C is for those at high risk of capture, including combat air crews and special operations forces. In fact, Level C is an integral part of the Special Forces Qualification Course. All course objectives are based on Department of Defense and Joint Personnel Recovery Agency guidance.

Fort Rucker and Fort Bragg have two of only five schools within the Department of Defense authorized to conduct Level C training. The others include Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash.; Naval Air Station Brunswick, Maine; and Naval Air Station North Island, Calif.



The SERE School at Fort Rucker is one of only five within the Department of Defense authorized to conduct Level C SERE training.

"Everybody has realized the importance of this training," said Steve, who first attended SERE School at Fort Bragg in 1993. "It's very sought after by all ranks, all MOSs. Word of mouth is out, and Soldiers who have been or will be at

the frontlines want to attend this course."

"We've kept up with the change in modern warfare," he said about the current Fort Rucker course. "It's adapted to deal with the Global War on Terrorism. It has grown to fit into today's Army."



SURVIVAL, EVASION, RESISTANCE, ESCAPE

SERE School at Fort Rucker, Ala., is accepting applications for students and instructors.

To enroll in the school, Soldiers can go to the Army Training Requirements and Resource System and search for SERE start dates. Fort Rucker's code is 011 with a course number 2C-F107/600-F17(CT).

Soldiers interested in becoming instructors must apply to the school directly and undergo an internal review process. Applicants must be staff sergeants or warrant officers or higher, must be SERE School graduates, must have been previously deployed and have combat experience, must hold security clearance and must pass psychological and physical exams.

Information: 334-255-9875
www.army.mil/info/organization/rucker/

TOUGH REWARDS

Scott, another instructor, said the course is as tough as it is rewarding.

"Soldiers have to be physically and mentally fit and be ready to train hard," said Scott, who graduated SERE School in 2001.

Scott said while more Soldiers are taking the course before deployments, the sheer number of them deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan has meant many more don't participate until after they've been in combat.

Regardless of when they attend SERE, Scott said, participants "leave as better-trained Soldiers and spread the word to their NCOs."

Aside from producing better-trained Soldiers, SERE graduates stronger men and women.

"I love watching them succeed," he said.

"Soldiers come into the course thinking they know what they know, but they come out stronger, knowing more about themselves than they could have ever imagined."

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ARTICLES OF THE CODE OF CONDUCT

I

I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.

II

I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command, I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist.

III

If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and to aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.

IV

If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

V

When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.

VI

I will never forget that I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.



Aside from survival skills, Soldiers are trained and tested to uphold the Code of Conduct as part of SERE School.